Friendly Chimeras

The Evolution of Critical Creative Practice in Exhibition Design

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Abstract

This paper aims to develop and articulate an historical perspective on the relationships between exhibition design, academic endeavour in the humanities and professional development. It reflects on design culture and educational philosophy and traces the recent history of curriculum development in exhibition design.

The exhibition design course at University of Lincoln has a sixty-year history. Reviewing the way its philosophy has evolved reveals a consistently dynamic reflection of real-world interests. This has involved a pragmatic and somewhat eclectic appropriation of theory, particularly from the expanding field of museology, and its integration into an increasingly critical mode of creative practice. When the course became an undergraduate honours degree in 1991 the 'project rationale' was introduced as an alternative to the traditional undergraduate dissertation. The principle of integrating theory and practice proved enormously successful and now applies throughout the curriculum.

Discourse analysis is applied to articles and course documents from the period 1970 to 1999. Bibliographical survey is also used to analyse the range and type of literature used to support students' studies. This is set against a background of influences on the exhibition design curriculum. These include contemporary changes in design practice, the growth of research into and for design, and changes in the national and institutional frameworks for course development.

The paper concludes with an evaluation of the role of the humanities in exhibition design creativity and highlights outstanding issues in the discipline.

Keywords: design education; design rationale; exhibition design; humanities; praxis.

Introduction[1]

This paper develops and articulates an historical perspective on the relationships between exhibition design, academic endeavour in the humanities and professional development. It reflects on design culture and educational philosophy and traces the recent history of curriculum development in exhibition design at the University of Lincoln. The aim is to establish a perspective on the past that informs, enriches and liberates our understanding of the present. As academics we are, after all, always in the position of needing to counter blind, repressive or homogenizing institutional forces with local strategies for remaining visible, creative and relevant within the organization, academia and, most importantly, the wider professional context of commerce and the cultural industries.

Focus and Methodology

Cox and Hassard identify four positions on retrospective research – 'controlling the past', 'interpreting the past', 'co-opting the past' and 'representing the past'.[2] In this paper we are engaged in making sense of the changing relationship between the teaching and learning of exhibition design practice and the theory used by tutors and students to frame their activity and articulate their thinking. Although this past is unrecoverable we believe it may be reconstructed through an interminable process of 'sense-making'. In terms of the Cox and Hassard framework, therefore, we are engaged in 'interpreting the past' and accept the contingent limitations of the resources available to us and the methods that can be applied to them.

Discourse analysis of a limited sort is applied to articles and course documents from the period 1970 to 1999. Bibliographical survey is also used to analyse the range of concepts and theories appropriated to shape and support students' studies. This is set against a background of other influences on the exhibition design curriculum. These include contemporary changes in design practice, the growth of research into and for design, and changes in the national and institutional frameworks for course development.

The paper concludes with an evaluation of the role of the humanities in exhibition design creativity and highlights outstanding issues in the discipline.

Foundations 1947-69

In the post-War period exhibition design was dominated by a focus on the phenomenon of display. Our first exhibition design course started in 1947 and engaged a progressive exploration of practical applications of the principle of display in a variety of commercial contexts. This was an intuitive starting point that initiated an evolutionary process in the development of a study programme. The influence of the Bauhaus notwithstanding, older humanist traditions persisted: studio learning was master-led and enormous faith was placed in exploring the co-generative relationship between drawing and making. The emergence of an objective focus of the study was naturally dominated by an interest in current creative practice in the 'real world'. Extant examination work clearly shows the early integration of two and three-

dimensional thinking, and particularly large-scale graphics and modular structure.

From the late 1950s through the 1960s, James Gardner was undoubtedly the most influential figure in the profession for two reasons. Firstly, 'G', as he was affectionately known in the business, had consolidated his position as a pioneer of modern exhibition design in Britain. Following the success of the 1946 'Britain Can Make It' exhibition, in the still empty galleries of the Victoria and Albert Museum, he had produced a succession of innovative and exuberant projects for products, interiors, art installations, commercial exhibitions, television drama, and promotional events including his work on the Festival of Britain as lead designer for the Festival Gardens, Battersea. Secondly, Janet Snowden and then Keith Clark, both of whom graduated from the exhibition design course in 1956, worked for G between 1956 and 1961.[3] Keith Clark then returned to Hull as an inspired and inspirational course tutor. The direct influence of G, however, was almost entirely through his completed works; on exhibition design he lectured infrequently and wrote little. *Exhibition and Display*, co-authored with Heller provides a little insight into Gardner's thinking,[4] but, the autobiographical *Elephants in the Attic* and *The Artful Designer*, the latter an updated and extended version of the former, were anecdotal, self-indulgent and, from an academic perspective, undisciplined.[5]

Another notable aspect of the course's relationship to the 'real world' is the development of the theatrical dimension of exhibitions. This may explain the extraordinary success of Hull's exhibition design graduates during the 1960s in moving into television design. At the time, established creatives in theatre and film production were sceptical about the new medium and this undoubtedly created opportunities for younger designers coming from other directions. The BBC approached the course in Hull looking for graduates to establish its new in-house production design studios in 1965. In the following decade numerous graduates joined public service and independent television companies as designers.[6]

Expansion of Interests 1969-91

Not until the 1970s did the dominant orientation toward display as the defining principle of exhibition design begin to be questioned. Once again the course philosophy reflected real-world interests. From the late 1960s through the 1970s the so-called 'graphics revolution' swept over the exhibitions scene. Trade fairs developed apace and exhibition stands increasingly became the three-dimensional expressions of a newly liberated graphic language. It was in this period, for example, that the work of Charles and Ray Eames became influential. We began to see major museums devise graphics-rich exhibitions and the rise of the 'book on the wall' phenomenon.

The 1970 Coldstream-Summerson Report on Art and Design Education had an unsettling impact on the established style of curriculum. Since 1968 one issue in particular exercised tutors:

there was a whole area of controversy surrounding art history and complementary studies, in which it sometimes appeared as if horny handed printers were slugging out a private feud with upstart young left elitists from the universities.[7]

A central recommendation of the report had been that the DipAD be made more flexible and liberal, and separated into two types. 'A' courses would continue to proceed from a foundation study of fine art and 'B' courses would 'involve "a substantial specialised technological content" with up to 12 months' sandwich training in industry'.[8]

The report's recommendations were divisive and provoked extensive dissent. Members of the art history and complementary studies panel of the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design (NCDAD) associated themselves with Sir Nikolaus Pevsner who 'pessimistically forecasts that most colleges will take an intellectually lazy view of their commitment to ['B' course] disciplines'.[9] The Society of Industrial Artists and Designers (SIAD) also quickly retracted its support for 'B' courses fearing their demotion to second-rate status and vulnerability to funding cuts. Harold Shelton, the principal of Hornsey College or Art, said 'I'm a little concerned that "technician" makes it [the 'B' course graduate] sound third rate'.[10] Misha Black, then Professor of Industrial Design at the Royal College of Art and a supporter of the generalist and specialist notions of DipAD qualification, also condemned the 'A' and 'B' terminology as 'a stupid mistake'.[11]

Within two years Art Colleges had, in the main, joined the new Polytechnics and their DipAD courses were revalidated as honours degrees by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). The remaining 'vocational' art and design courses offered college diplomas or were accredited by the SIAD. In 1981 these came under the auspices of the short-lived Design Technician Education Council (DATEC) which was later subsumed by the Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC). The problem, in part, was that funding for four-year 'B' courses at degree level was rarely forthcoming. Subjects such as industrial design and interior design, which would have fitted well with the criteria for 'B' course status, therefore, went down one of two equally unsatisfactory routes. Some recruited 18-year-olds via Foundation courses to three-year degree programmes without the intended sandwich year in industry. Some became lower-level four-year programmes and recruited 16-year-olds to a two-year Ordinary National Diploma followed by a two-year Higher National Diploma.

The four-year Exhibition Design course at Hull received SIAD approval in 1963 and subsequently went with BTEC validation. By the early seventies the course philosophy at Hull became far more explicit. The curriculum became more structured. Communication emerged as the central focus of exhibition design associated with a growing interest in the museum context. Exhibition design students recognised the rationale for engaging with the humanities. Inspired by events such as the 'blockbuster' *Tutankhamun* exhibition at the British Museum and the 'ground breaking' *Story of the Earth* at the Geological Museum,[12] student projects became concerned with the design of 'storytelling' exhibitions, exhibitions whose genesis depended on the explicit structuring of information content and its interpretation in terms of a variety of graphic,

audio-visual and three-dimensional media. The pursuit of this new focus elevated theory to a necessary underpinning for creative decision making. In due course this would lead to an increasingly critical edge to exhibition design practice. It is ironic that many of the design subjects that converted to degrees in 1972 struggled for many years with the relationship between the creative practice and history of art/complementary studies elements of the curriculum.

Three key contemporary publications, representing the practices of three very different museums, spurred the engagement of exhibition design with theory *Communicating with the Museum Visitor* (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto), *The Design of Educational Exhibits* (Natural History Museum, London) and *On Display* (British Museum, London).[13] The ROM book introduced the idea that master planning for a whole institution provided the opportunity to apply theory directly to serving visitor interests and needs. This placed educational provision and communication design at the centre of the process and presented exhibitions as part of a continuum of communications. The key contribution of Miles and his multidisciplinary team at the NHM was in using a range of psychological theories to underpin a systematic method of planning, designing and evaluating educational exhibitions. Hall's approach was rather different reflecting the BM's emphasis on presenting extraordinarily rich collections to the public; Hall conceived a 'design grammar' founded on a primarily three-dimensional notion of 'exhibition language'.

The process of integrating two-dimensional, three-dimensional, audiovisual and theatrical elements led to a concern with animating the space of exhibition. This new theoretical focus was something presaged by Eco.

...the simultaneous projection of many movies, the sense of rhythm, the contradictory or complementary play of competing images, the suggestion of new spatial effects, were superior to any known Cinerama techniques.[14]

What was initially a rationale for interpreting text and supporting narrative structure became subsumed in a more sophisticated vision of the nature of exhibition phenomena articulated, for example, in the 1990 proposal document for the first BA (Hons) programme in Exhibition & Museum Design as '...forms of three-dimensional and time-based communications that have cultural, informational, interpretive, or educational objects', which immanently embeds a socio-technical conceptualization of exhibition.[15] In the following five years an actively interrogated and theorized conception of exhibition developed which responded to postmodern 'incredulity toward grand narrative',[16] implosion of disciplines[17] and reflexivity of practices.[18] Exhibition design is 'an interdisciplinary area of creative practice' with a 'distinctive integrative concern...'. It 'treats communication problems and the problem of the physical environment as a single object of design – **the communicative environment**.' (emphasis in the original).[19]

Shifts in Theory

Given the breadth of exhibition design as a creative discipline – it

...has evolved as a new discipline, as an apex of all media and powers of communication and of collective efforts and effects. The combined means of visual communication constitutes a remarkable complexity... The total application of all plastic and psychological means (more than anything else) makes exhibition design an intensified and new language.[20]

one might expect that it would be well covered in the literature. But there are few books on exhibition design and this is undoubtedly to do with the fleeting existence of exhibitions. Most are less permanent and rather less well documented than interiors, and more ephemeral than print; paper can survive a very long time. Exhibition structure disappears; if anything survives it is the products and collections that were displayed. Many books that purport to be about exhibitions are actually about their contents and have nothing to say about exhibition design. Indeed the literature on 'design', what designers do and what they produce – drawings, models, specification documents, etc – is, in general, rather small. Before 1980, sources of design theory in general, exhibition design theory specifically, are rare. In this regard the books by Potter, Papanek, Pye, Mayall and Lawson were precious and inspirational.[21] What is notable, however, is that none of these texts considers the creation of environments as communication design. Even Lawson's consideration of the complexity of architectural design stops short of embracing its communication design aspects.

The way exhibition design theory has been taught has therefore involved borrowing from other disciplines, and we have not hesitated to wade into sometimes quite murky waters. There is a small literature on the history of exhibitions. The earliest to have proved valuable to us was written by Allwood, an exhibition designer, and grew out of his hobby of collecting ephemera associated with the Great Exhibition of 1851 and subsequent world's fairs and international expositions.[22] He identifies the precursors of the modern exhibition from the *fariæ* of ancient Rome, medieval fairs and markets, and cabinets of curiosity to the first machine competitions of the 18th century. He then proceeds to tell an engaging story of cultural, organizational and architectural innovation from the 1851 Crystal Palace to Osaka in 1971. Although the experimental architecture and urban design of world's fairs dominates the discourse on international expositions the key idea we take from Allwood is the defining connection between exhibition and the great variety of reasons for and methods of communicating in dynamic spatial environments. This remains, however, largely untheorized even amongst the great swathes of theorising about mass communication in the marketing and communications literature. Alles is almost alone in offering a more thorough consideration of the context, theory and practice of exhibit marketing.[23]

Exhibition has a political and economic place in modernity that explains the emergence of the professional exhibition designer in twentieth century industrial culture. It does not, however, address the complex issues with which exhibition makers in general, exhibition 'designers' specifically, must engage. For this a discursive literature with a critical dimension is needed. Amongst the few books that deal with the social, political and cultural significance of worlds fairs and international expositions, Greenhalgh considers the evolution of great exhibitions as expressions of imperialism and national identity.[24] And Harvey takes the argument a step further by questioning the validity of the modernist

strategies of objectifying culture and projecting images of institutional and technological progress, which the great exhibitions exemplify, in an age of commodification, simulation and reflexivity.[25]

Museography and Museology

Most of the critical edge, however, is to be found in the museum studies literature that burgeoned in the 1990s, the 'new museology',[26] and this has had the greatest influence on the exhibition design discipline's theoretical 'coming of age'. This literature is synthetic in the sense that it borrows widely from the arts and humanities as well as from the social and natural sciences.

Alexander was a museographer writing about a stable typology of museums and a modernist notion of progress in practice. Museography projects the Enlightenment ideals of progress towards a perfected form of practice built on a foundation of universal scientific principles. Once postmodern uncertainty invades critical thinking and these foundations begin to melt away museum practice must reinvent itself in a new self-consciously critical mode, which has underpinned innovations in every aspect of practice including exhibition design. For example, the key difference between the broadly contemporary texts by Brawne[27] and Miles *et al* [28] is that Brawne, the architect, casts his exposition on museum design in terms of the aesthetics and technics of display and an orthodox spatial logic whereas Miles *et al* provide a theoretical framework that draws on developmental psychology, cognitive theory, demographic studies, conservation science, and management theory and cast their exposition in terms of critical decision making.

The work of Hooper-Greenhill in connecting changing conceptions of museum with the Foucaultian idea of an 'archaeology of knowledge' and in contextualizing education in museums provides a powerful rationale for innovation in exhibition form rooted in understanding contemporary institutional norms.[29] Pearce's structuralist approach to theorizing the collecting and interpreting activities of people highlights that exhibition design is not neutral and that the designer has a role in framing and shaping meaning in exhibitions.[30] Hewison criticized a new kind of popular heritage interpretation for pandering to people's yearnings for the comforting and easily comprehensible sense of community that a neatly packaged and mythical past might provide. Lowenthal was more generous and optimistic seeing in this a professional engagement with the communication possibilities of the new immersive technologies of entertainment available to museums.

These discourses theorized the unstable conditions in which professionals make collections work in museums and the interminable, cross-disciplinary, collaborative endeavour required to deal with the uncertainties of cultural and political relations in a 'glocalized' economy. The impact on exhibition design students was profound; approaches to interpretation design evolved that responded to specific institutional contexts, attempted to understand visitor characteristics and exploited exhibition technologies in ways that respected audience diversity and intelligence.

Bennett also provides key insights into the creative nexus. He suggests that however radical curators may wish to be, they can hardly do otherwise than construct a bourgeoisie myth of the working people. The critical role of the exhibition designer emerges out of this perspective. By applying creative thought to myriad physical and experiential aspects of communicative environments the exhibition designer adds other dimensions to the exhibition making process, which is therefore best organized as a collaborative activity. Consequently, extraordinary exhibitions, exhibitions that purposefully modify or subvert the institutional frame, do get built.[31]

The conception of exhibition design that emerges as a result of this upheaval in theory is one thoroughly engaged in shaping institutional conditions and, therefore, one which blurs the boundaries between previously discreet arenas of practice.

The same perspective applies in the commercial exhibition field – trade fairs, consumer shows, themed retail and leisure – through the theorization of 'brand environment' that has emerged in the last decade. For exhibition design the most notable theoretical contributions to this build on Baudrillard's mature work. Ritzer analyses the variety of contemporary leisure spaces as 'cathedrals of consumption',[32] Gottdiener uncovers the processes of constructing meaning through consumption,[33] and Lash and Urry depict the global movement of symbolic value through entertainment and so-called 'lifestyle' choices.[34] The non-foundational 'postmodernist' perspective informing this work has had its own impact on our teaching and research. This is best illustrated by the evolution of the final-year written assignment on our undergraduate programme.

Integrating theory and practice

In art and design the traditional undergraduate dissertation was the culmination of studies in history of art and design and complementary studies, which were added to the curriculum when Polytechnic art and design courses converted to degrees in the early 1970s. We designed our degree programme twenty years later and, with the benefit of hindsight, decided that we did not want fragments of art history, sociology, and other academic disciplines taught largely out of context to students of whom only a minority would perceive the relevance of the study. Consequently we devised the major project 'rationale' as a vehicle for integrating theory and practice.

Subsequently we have worked back through the curriculum to create a programme in which theory is progressively integrated with creative practice, technology and professional studies.

First year lectures are presented in the context of a sequence of studio projects that introduce fundamental principles in spatial, three-dimensional, graphic and interpretation design. They cover much more than can be directly linked to project work but connections are reinforced where appropriate. For example, theories about the human body and spatial experience prevalent in early 20th century modernism are used to frame a project exploring spatial and formal composition, the development of a visual language for a design, and the use of

this to produce a functional interior. Similarly, theories about the narrative experience of place and the construction of meaning in the environment, which connect with urban theory, the history of film, and postmodern design strategies, are used to frame a project exploring space, movement, and site-specific event design.

The most important project to integrate theory and practice at this stage is the 'Modern Living' project. Students gather information on a significant 20th Century designer and write a short paper. This informs the work of a small team which designs and builds a small exhibit to communicate key information about their designer and his or her influence on today's world. In this way exhibition design, interior design and architecture students are able to produce an exhibition on twentieth-century design from which all students can learn.

In the second year, theory focuses on three themes, 'sustainability', 'inclusivity' and 'innovation' (SII), which connect directly with notions of evolutionary process and reflection of real-world interests in studio projects. For example, interpretation theory frames a practical workshop on devising a storyline or interpretive scheme for an exhibition which becomes part of the brief for a design project. Theories on equality, empowerment and education are associated with practical workshops on exhibition evaluation and access audit. Design seminars use these principles in discourse and the formative evaluation of students' design proposals.

The most important integration of theory in second year work is contextual research into the exhibitions industry, personal development planning and the keeping of a reflective journal. At the beginning of the year this leads to the writing of a report which identifies a company or museum to approach for a short placement. It continues later in the year and informs the students' development of alternative proposals for final-year projects.

By this stage students have established a broad foundation of theory and the skills necessary to engage in sustained critical reflection on their design work and to articulate and support persuasive justifications for their decisions. In the final year this is what we ask students to do through writing a major project rationale. Designing and writing inform each other and progress in parallel throughout the year. Students draw on the full range of theory to underpin their work and are encouraged to question assumptions at each stage. This starts with analyses of client context, site and target audiences, progresses to development of storyline, access strategy and space planning, and ultimately focusses down onto interpretation issues and explores strategy for exploiting exhibition technologies, media and display content at a more detailed level.

Conclusion

If asked: 'what is the glue that holds exhibition design together as a critical creative practice?' perhaps the most plausible answer is 'theory drawn from the humanities.'

The new museology and theories of symbolic economy offer an uncanny reflection of classical discourses on historicity, political ethics, and human

nature. It is as if Modernity was a circular journey from universalism, through increasingly diverse and fragmented intellectual endeavours, to a new holistic approach to the human project. Arguably all that has changed is that universalism has been replaced by a principle of 'complementarity'. Certainly, this author feels that the licence to embrace diverse knowledge and theory has energized the discourse on exhibition design. In terms of the classical discourse on 'poetics', 'technics' and 'praxis' the latter is most important. My colleagues and I set out to shape exhibition design through the integration of theory and practice and this is why the development of a rigorous technique of post-rationalization characterizes the major project rationale that we ask our students to write as part of the design process. It is also why the themes of sustainability, inclusivity and innovation are so prominent in our current way of thinking through what we do. They frame exhibition design contingently and productively as 'praxis'. They represent multiple collisions of positivistic science, liberatory politics, and interpretive theory ...the epistemologically incommensurable. In the three semesters [sic] of our academic year – winter, spring and summer – they are the friendly Chimera with which we currently wrestle in order to gain a fragile dominion over our territory.

In the context of the present-day ubiquity of communications and a consequent merging of the real and the virtual in built environments, a leading question for us is whether our conception of 'communicative environment' has far wider implications for architecture and urbanism than we have to date felt the need to explore.

References

1 I am grateful to my colleague Pam Locker for reading drafts of this paper and advising on content and direction; any errors are, of course, entirely the author's responsibility.

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